

# Djibouti

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Djibouti has become a center of international attention after allowing the United States to establish a military base on its territory in 2003, but it is far from clear if the limelight will impel improvements in civil liberties. Although permitted to campaign, the opposition is not represented in the legislature. However, women are given political rights. The press is intimidated. Prison conditions are appalling.

- [Political Expression](#)
- [Press](#)
- [Prison Conditions](#)
- [Women](#)
- [Expulsion of Illegal Immigrants](#)
- [Key International Actors](#)

## Political Expression

Legislative elections at the beginning of the 2003 had familiar consequences: all sixty-five seats in the legislature were won by the government coalition (UMP, the Union for a Presidential Majority), just as they had been in the previous election in 1997. The opposition coalition (UAD, Union for a Democratic Alternative) was permitted to campaign freely and the government press gave reasonably unbiased coverage to UAD candidate speeches. . There were unconfirmed reports of voting irregularities, such as denying UAD access to electoral lists, failure to distribute voting cards to thousands of would-be voters, and voting boxes being impounded before the results could be tabulated. An international observer group considered the elections reasonably untainted but acknowledged that it could not effectively determine if there had been ballot stuffing in the provinces.

## Press

The government controls all electronic media, the sole television station, three radio stations, and the only internet provider. In previous years, the government prevented access to opposition and human rights organization websites. The government publishes the leading newspaper, La Nation, a biweekly.

Although non-governmental publications are allowed, the government punishes criticism severely. In April 2003, the government arrested the editor and publisher of le Renouveau, Daher Ahmed Farah, for "defaming" the army's chief of staff. (Farah is also president of one of the opposition political parties). He was jailed in an isolation cell for two months until a trial at which he was acquitted. An appellate court promptly reversed this decision and Farah was again placed in isolation. The appellate court ordered him to pay civil damages of 13 million Djibouti francs (about U.S.\$74,000) and a civil fine of 1 million Djibouti francs (about U.S. \$5,500). Per capita income in Djibouti is under U.S. \$ 800. Farah was released in August 2003 after over four months imprisonment. Le Renouveau was banned from publishing for three months after his release. The newspaper resumed publishing in October 2003.

## Prison Conditions

The only prison in Djibouti, Gabode, is severely overcrowded. The government acknowledges that sanitary conditions are deplorable and food and water rations inadequate. Some cells, such as the one in which Farah was incarcerated, are unbearably hot.

Juveniles are often jailed with adults because Djibouti has no place to house delinquent youth. It also has no juvenile justice system.

### **Women**

A law enacted in time for the 2003 elections reserved 10 per cent of all legislative seats for women.; in fact, eight of the sixty-five members in the new assembly are female. There are few women in government positions but the president of the Supreme Court is female and there is one woman in the president's cabinet (the minister for women, family, and social affairs).

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is prohibited but is still widely practiced. There have been no prosecutions to enforce the law.

### **Expulsion of Illegal Immigrants**

In September 2003, the government ordered the expulsion of 100,000 illegal immigrants from neighboring countries, over one-eighth of the country's population. About 9,000 of those to be expelled applied for asylum at a refugee camp operated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The camp was designed to hold no more than 3,000 and reports in October painted a grim picture of sanitary conditions. The minister of the interior claimed that most of the asylum seekers do not qualify as refugees.

### **Key International Actors**

In 2003, the United States established a base housing 1,800 military and Central Intelligence Agency operatives to hunt for and destroy terrorist cells in the Horn of Africa and to train armed forces in neighboring states in counter-terrorism. The French military presence is even larger, at 2,600 troops. France pays €30 million (U.S. \$35.3 million) per year to Djibouti in rent and other costs for the military base.

As a reward for hosting the U.S. base, the United States announced a U.S. \$20 million grant to Djibouti for 2003-2004. Of this sum, \$12 million is to be spent on expanding primary health care and \$8 million on basic education.

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